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Chapter Seven: Zara and David III

I can't pinpoint the moment in my memories when I first lit a cigarette. The ordinary kind, I mean, the blond ones with light tobacco.

I have a rough idea of when it might've been, though. It must've been during high school, when I was playing the part of a

rebel, or perhaps a thrill-seeker, like any teenager, sneaking away from classes to claim the school as my own.

Behind the gym, I'd climb the service stairs to the first-floor rooftop, slipping between water tanks until I reached the air conditioning vents. I'd scramble up quickly to avoid being spotted, and then I'd arrive at the highest roof on the second floor, where I could see nearly the entire campus. Don't ask me why, but that place was littered with old desks—dark, rusted, their wood rotting away, yet for some reason, the administration refused to toss them out. It was the perfect hideout.

I'd build a makeshift shelter, settle in comfortably, and pull out a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a pair of binoculars I'd bought with my savings. I'd scan my surroundings once more, ensuring no camera could catch me, and then I'd light up, savoring the calm.

The binoculars? Well, the high windows of the girls' locker room were angled just right, letting me peek inside without

leaving my seat.

I'm not proud of it, but I'll justify it by saying I was just a laid-back, selfish kid with zero ambition—though, truth be told, not much has changed, except maybe the laid-back part.

...

I'll never let Angelique get her hands on this chapter.

The point is, I'm certain that's how I smoked my first cigarette. At fifteen or sixteen, around the same age Angelique had hers. I say "around" because, as I've mentioned before, that girl's true age is a mystery to me. Her name, her origins, her birthday… I'm only 99% sure she's French, but that's about it.

Back to the story, what I do remember clearly is the first time I tried a black cigarette.

Harsh, bitter, it left a rough texture on my lips, sour, stifling, scratching my throat, releasing an aged, almost musty

essence… and yet, somehow, it tasted like peace.

I'm no fan of those smokes—honestly, I don't even like them—but there's something about them. Despite how much they repel me, the feelings from that first time flood back whenever I light one up. They transport me instantly to another state of mind. They… soothe me. They ease my nerves. They trick me into believing everything's alright.

I hear the same voices, see the same faces, feel the same drunken dizziness, even smell the same food. The fire warms me just as it did, the night breeze cools my cheeks, I ignore the same distant lights, and I glance at my rifle with the same indifference. I half-listen to the same stories, admire the same girl's silhouette, get scolded by the same teammate, and offer the same excuses. The moon still hides from the sky, the same clouds loom overhead, the same dog howls in the distance, and the same guitarist makes a quip about it. I steal a glance at the sharpshooter to my right, the same

redhead on my left tells me we did well, the burning wood crackles again, and I fill my lungs with the same smoke curling from the cigarette between my fingers.

February, 2021

I don't know the exact date or place, but I know it was in France. Exhausted, after wrapping up an operation whose name escapes me, with positive results but a significance that, years later, feels hazy. On the edge of a nameless village, abandoned by war, right beside a dirt road, we decided to have a picnic.

Traveling from the southern Iberian Peninsula to northern France was grueling. Air travel was avoided due to Amere's air dominance. Plotting flight paths that wouldn't get us shot down was a nightmare… and the moment we arrived, we were handed the reckless order to patrol the southern route to Chambois.

Amere knew the strategic value of French territory for controlling central

Western Europe, and they threw everything they had at breaking its defenses. The skirmishes and battles there were long, brutal, savage, and devastating; I fought in many, but that's not what I want to write about now.

Around midnight, an hour after we'd secured that village far south of the city, the French forces we supported set up a security perimeter around the settlement, posting guards everywhere. VBL armored vehicles patrolled the area, MAG machine guns covered every corner, comms units chattered constantly with two UAVs circling overhead, and there were operators and soldiers to spare. Add to that the NATO support forces, who'd even deployed anti-air defenses. I say "they," but in the end, I was assigned the same way.

The mix of personalities among the forces was something else. The bulk was French army, but there were also two German platoons, a couple of American agents, a Belgian platoon, Swedish specialists, and an Austrian platoon—us. Oh, and plenty of other soldiers from

different nations, sent for intelligence tasks while aiding the French. Language barriers, as you can imagine, made real mingling tough.

"I don't care, I prefer smaller groups. Like ours."

"Don't you want to mix with other cultures, David?"

"It's not that I don't want to. Trust me, I'd love to have that Russian from earlier sitting on my lap while I teach her German, but dealing with cultural differences is just too much hassle for me."

"Russian? There's a Russian? Where?"

"You didn't see her at the briefing? She was off to the side. Not during the deployment either? She wore this tight uniform that… what, not even in combat?"

"David, in all three situations you mentioned, there are far more important things to focus on. How do you find time to spot the same woman three times? I'm not the one slipping up here!"

"You're slipping by not noticing that bombshell! Seriously, Alez. One of these days, an AT4 round's gonna hit us, and you'll die without ever taking it easy for a single day."

I clicked my tongue, annoyed at his grim example. He knew I was terrified of rocket launchers. He kept talking, but I tuned him out, my eyes drifting to the group finishing the second large tent across from the bonfire.

Helek was there, along with Mike, Henry, and Zara.

At the center roared a massive but contained fire, to the north stood two sturdy green tents, a dirt road ran alongside, and around the flames sat nearly our entire platoon. Nearly, because some were on security duty and couldn't join us.

I'll write more about my platoon someday… maybe.

"Roa and Freak, go grab more firewood."

"There's enough wood for the whole night, we're fine."

"Will either of you be sober enough at 3 a.m. to chop branches when the fire's dying?"

"Uh…"

"Why don't you go, Evans?"

"Yeah! Last I checked, you're not exactly a sergeant, so don't boss us around."

"Because I'm cooking! Can't you see? Did those radios fry what little brains you have left?"

"And who are you to talk? Failed marksman, when was the last time you got a key role with Zara or Erica around?"

It might sound like a heated argument, but they weren't serious. The others laughed and egged them on, settling closer to the fire. We seized every moment when

Kyd's eyes weren't on us.

David and I stood a bit apart from the rest, just watching for now.

"Hehe… hey, Alez…"

"Now what's your deal?"

"I was thinking, you made a weird face when I mentioned that Russian."

"I didn't make any face."

"Oh, you did! You whipped your head around like a starving dog! You into Russians?"

"Russians are…"

Pale, silky skin, clear crystalline eyes, a sleek, defined figure, an accent that could shatter glaciers, a demeanor that… yeah, I had a highly flattering stereotype of Russian women in my head. I liked them. Still do.

Back then, I'd only seen a few Russian women in person, and they all conveniently fit that image. Not my fault.

"Yeah, Russians are pretty…"

"Look, over there."

David turned me around, the bottle in his hand sloshing with clear liquid.

"See that shack? No, not that one. The one with the broken window and no door. That one… closer to the center. That's where the Russians are. I saw them go in a few minutes ago."

"Them?"

"Yeah, three or four of them. From what I overheard, they're here to study Amere's attack and defense tactics. Intelligence found traces of insurgent activity in Siberia, and these Slavs want to be ready so they don't suffer like Europe is."

Right, I remember now. Back then, Amere's name was starting to circulate, mostly among troops, not so much civilians. The group was gaining strength.

"Are they military?"

"Probably Spetsnaz GRU or something like that."

"Are there women in the GRU?"

"Do I look like I'd know?"

"No."

"Damn, I wish I spoke Russian to ask her. That, and a few other things while—"

"Someone's coming out…"

"Oh! Finally!"

Not caring if our teammates behind us noticed and wondered, we crouched and took cover. One of the trucks we'd arrived in was parked nearby, and it became our hideout. David yanked me by the collar and positioned me behind the cab, where we could peek out clearly.

I heard the bottle cap unscrew, then saw David take a hefty swig.

"And that's…"

"Vodka."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Spying on a Russian and drinking vodka, it's the way to go."

"Where'd you get it?"

"If we ever go to that country, I'd love to try Sbiten. And Kvass, they say it's milder, but it sounds intriguing."

"You're not gonna tell me where—"

"Here, you're getting drunk with me."

And he handed me the bottle.

When I was younger, I barely drank. My tongue couldn't handle strong flavors, and my tolerance was pathetic. Honestly, I only drank because of David.

"Just a little…"

The liquor burned my throat.

"Brr… it's strong…"

"Shh! There they are!"

A man stepped through the doorway. A burly, muscular, intimidating figure in a heavy-looking uniform, his face hidden by a helmet.

"I still haven't seen that guy's face or heard his voice. Total mystery."

And he kept drinking, carefree.

The operator carried a long, sturdy rifle on his back, fitted with a massive, eye-catching suppressor. I know the weapon, though its name escapes me. It's the sniper version of the ASh 12.7, a Russian beast named for its caliber.

Two more followed, both wielding cutting-edge AK-12s from that year, which I never got to touch but would've loved to. They were bareheaded, but one caught my eye—short, pale blond hair, almost white, and a face marred by what looked like burn scars.

"The one with the scars is… Igor, maybe? No clue. He's tight with the

Russian wo—there! Our target!"

The woman who stepped out only cemented my stereotype.

A beauty, about a hundred sixty five centimeters tall, with nearly white, impeccably straight hair tied back, two thick strands framing her porcelain-delicate face, their ends nearly brushing her modest chest. Her sky-blue eyes gleamed behind rectangular glasses. Her lips curved into a soft smile that matched her tailored gray suit, more suited for a secretary than a battlefield. Even her tie complemented her gaze. She clutched a clipboard tightly to her chest, looking utterly professional.

She was stunning, a perfect ten.

"Woah…"

"A star fallen from the sky, right? And those glasses—I hadn't seen her wear them before."

"No weapons. Not even a holster."

"You'd have lost it seeing her fire that Abakan during the op. She wore a dark blue uniform… I'd bet my life she's intelligence or special ops. And she's—"

"Gorgeous. She's gorgeous."

"She's gorgeous, Alez!"

I snatched the bottle from David and took a swig, my eyes never leaving her.

Her eyes and hair shimmered vividly under the floodlights the French had set up everywhere.

Thanks to the V-neck of her suit, I could glimpse a faintly intimate sliver of her alabaster skin, and—maybe it was the vodka talking—I ached to kiss it just to feel its texture.

David and I were like wolves eyeing a rabbit.

Though that rabbit could probably snap us both in half with a single move if she wanted.

"Anya."

"Anya?"

"That's what I heard someone call her earlier. If that's her name, it suits her perfectly."

"Anya…"

"Damn, if I were her target, I'd let her seduce me and spill every secret I have."

"It's not that you'd let her seduce you—you wouldn't stand a chance."

"I'm not you, Alez. I wouldn't fall that easily. You, on the other hand, look like you've never touched a woman in your life."

I glared at David and smacked the truck's hood. I hated how he always put himself above me, no matter the topic. It really made me feel lesser.

"What do you know about—?!"

"SHH!"

David waved his hands frantically in front of his face, signaling me to shut up,

but I didn't catch on right away. I don't recall what else I yelled, only that he glanced back at the people we'd been watching, and I followed suit.

She was looking at me.

"Ah…"

Maybe I'd raised my voice too much, or the smack on the truck was too loud, but I'd locked eyes with that pale-skinned beauty, her expression icy.

She carried no weapon, but her stunned look was enough to disarm me. I didn't know what to do.

"She's…"

Heat rushed to my face, my cheeks flushed, my mouth watered. I was as nervous as a student facing the worst exam of the year without studying.

Damn it, David was right about me.

"Idiot."

David grabbed my collar again and pulled me behind the truck. We both exhaled, hidden at last.

I wasn't scared of us getting scolded for acting foolish in front operators from all over the world; I was just mortified at looking so ridiculous in front of her.

The worst part? I never locked eyes with that Anya again.

Abandoning our espionage mission, we rejoined the platoon and sat by the fire. Everyone was there, chatting, playing cards, teasing, laughing, joking, as if we weren't in the heart of Europe's worst war yet. Some warmed food over the flames, others bragged about combat feats and body counts, while a few just watched in silence, their smiles a mix of calm and drunkenness.

They didn't even notice us slump onto the ground.

We stayed quiet, taking in the scene.

David passed me the drink, I passed it back, and we went back and forth until the bottle was empty.

Time passed, and I don't recall what we talked about. Everything only felt significant again when our missing friend showed up. She plopped down beside me, slapped my back, and sipped from a gray canteen.

"Did you hear that?! Kiara's smashed and told Mike she wanted to do something with him! But he's just as drunk and burst out laughing!"

Zaralyne was cackling, still smacking my back. She'd clearly had a lot to drink too.

"Hahaha! Oh… poor girl. The look of shock on her face was one-of-a-kind, though I felt a bit bad for her. Then Mike tried to backtrack, saying she's actually really pretty, but it was too late! Kiara was already crying."

"Should you be laughing that hard about

it?"

"I don't know, Alez. Honestly, I don't."

"That's rough, Za—"

"Javier! You pulling out the guitar?"

Oh, right. Javier was the guitarist. I'd forgotten.

"She's not even listening to us anymore."

"That one you played last time, what was it called?"

My vision blurred at times, and I couldn't shake a vague fog in my head. My eyes felt sensitive, so I looked up slightly. Away from the fire, I spotted… hills in the distance. Not too tall, not too close. On a whim, I stared at them, trying to gauge the distance by guesswork, and then…

An explosion. Then another, and another. The sound didn't reach my ears, but far off, atop those rises, a battle raged in full force. People were dying practically before our eyes, and we were living the

night like it was a party.

But… so what? People died daily, and I'd long stopped flinching at turning bodies to lead-riddled heaps. Far or near, in front or behind, it didn't matter. I didn't care—though maybe that was the booze talking.

I lifted my gaze higher, to the sky. No moon in sight. I was about to let myself wax poetic, but the slurred voice of the redheaded drunk to my left yanked me back to earth.

"You know, Alez…"

He held another bottle—rum this time—half-empty.

"Maybe we don't have a Russian in the platoon, but we've got some top-tier quality."

"Zara?"

"Huh? No, not Zara. I mean… wait, you into Zara?"

"I think she's pretty, at least."

"Guess so… but no, not her. I'm talking about—"

"Erica."

"Yeah, Erica."

Erica Dusternduub, our platoon's second sharpshooter. A blonde who always wore her medium-length hair in a single ponytail at her neck. Short, around a hundred fifty-five centimeters tall, she was our group's icon of beauty. An Austrian-German with an addictive accent, a face so cute it begged you to make her smile, and a body… the uniform looked incredible on her. To top it off, she was ridiculously friendly, easy to approach, great at conversation, and always seemed to have endless topics to discuss. She wasn't an expert at much beyond shooting, but she got excited learning new things. And…

"Good. Glad we're on the same page, Alez."

"Bet the whole platoon is…"

"By the way, Alez…"

"…"

David leaned on my shoulder, flashing an irritating smirk, sloshing his drink loudly. I pretended I didn't know what was coming.

"You… no, actually… I heard some rumors, Alez."

"There's a lot of rumors going around…"

"No, no. This one's got witnesses and everything. Alez, you…"

"Gonna keep your mouth shut tonight or what?"

I swiped the bottle from his hand and chugged, trying to kill my brain cells before hearing what he'd say next.

"You got something going with Erica?"

"…"

"Alez~"

"It's not a thing or anything…"

"No way… it's real?!"

"It was just a moment!"

"Spill. Spill before I kill you out of jealousy."

Not long after what happened in Zaragoza, we had a gathering much like this one, with booze and all, but at a cheap hotel where we rented out a whole floor for the night. We had a day or two off from our duties. Everyone was there. We laughed, drank, talked, all afternoon and night. At some point, Erica came over to me—I don't quite remember why. David and Zara were passed out in a corner, too drunk to stay awake. She sat next to me, told a couple of jokes, and we both laughed. She was plastered, and so was I. By accident, my hand landed on her leg, and she didn't pull away. She looked into my eyes, gave a shy smile, and…

"And the next thing I remember is waking up to a high-pitched squeal, seeing her on the other side of the bed, clutching the sheets, holding her head, and trembling as she saw me—like her—stark naked. Neither of us remembers exactly what happened."

"Every detail was true! You made history, Alez!"

"Who told you?! Who was the witness?"

"M-Mike! Mike said he saw you two getting cozy on the couch that night at the hotel, then disappearing down the hallway. That's all it took for everyone's imaginations to run wild."

"Poor Erica if she finds out…"

"You guys think Erica's that pretty?"

Zaralyne seemed to have only caught half our conversation, or she'd have chimed in on the other topic. Either way, she didn't hesitate to butt in.

"It's tough when your teammate gets all

the praise, you know?"

"Jealous of Erica? Or is it envy?"

"It's more than that. I don't care that much… no, that sounds contradictory. I care, but not because I want to outshine her—it's that she proves my grandpa was right."

"Here we go again…"

I elbowed David in the ribs as he chuckled quietly while I downed more rum.

"When I was a teenager, my grandpa told me I was too unladylike, that I'd lose my 'charm' because of it. I'd snap back that it didn't matter, that being as good a shot as him was more important than being… feminine."

"And he'd say…"

"He'd say that had nothing to do with my lack of grace."

"Hm…"

"And now look at Erica! She's an

incredible sharpshooter and oozes femininity and beauty from every pore! Fuck it! Fine, I'll admit it—I'm insanely jealous!"

"You've got your own charm, Zara."

"I don't want your compliments, Alez!"

"Can't win ‘em all, kid."

"I told you to stop talking to me like that!"

Someone laughed nearby, and I glanced over. Javier was subtly watching us. I acted like I didn't notice and closed my eyes, but before I could lose myself in the platoon's laughter and murmurs, a loud, distant howl hit my ears.

"It must hate our fun."

The guitarist said, and I just huffed, opening my eyes again.

"Oh, right, I've got something else for you guys."

David said, rummaging through his many pockets.

"More stuff? Where'd you get all this, David?"

"Well, remember when we cleared the village? Kyd put me in charge of checking the southeast houses, and since there was no danger, I poked through a few drawers."

"Da—David! That's looting! It's a war crime!"

"And you'll get me locked up if you keep yelling, woman!"

"And you only found booze?"

"Also a couple of watches, some jewelry, and… this!"

The redhead raised a worn, leather-covered brown box in his right hand. Inside were twenty black cigarettes.

"Huh… never tried those."

"First time for you then, Alez."

He lit three and handed one to each of us.

"Ugh… guys, I don't even smoke…"

But Zara was so drunk she didn't hesitate to bring it to her lips. We exchanged a knowing look and took a long drag. David exhaled in pure relaxation, I grimaced at the bitter taste, and Zara coughed.

"K-kuh… this is awful, how do you guys stand it…?"

"I don't like it, it's… no, the flavor's just bad."

"What do you two know…"

Only David truly enjoyed it.

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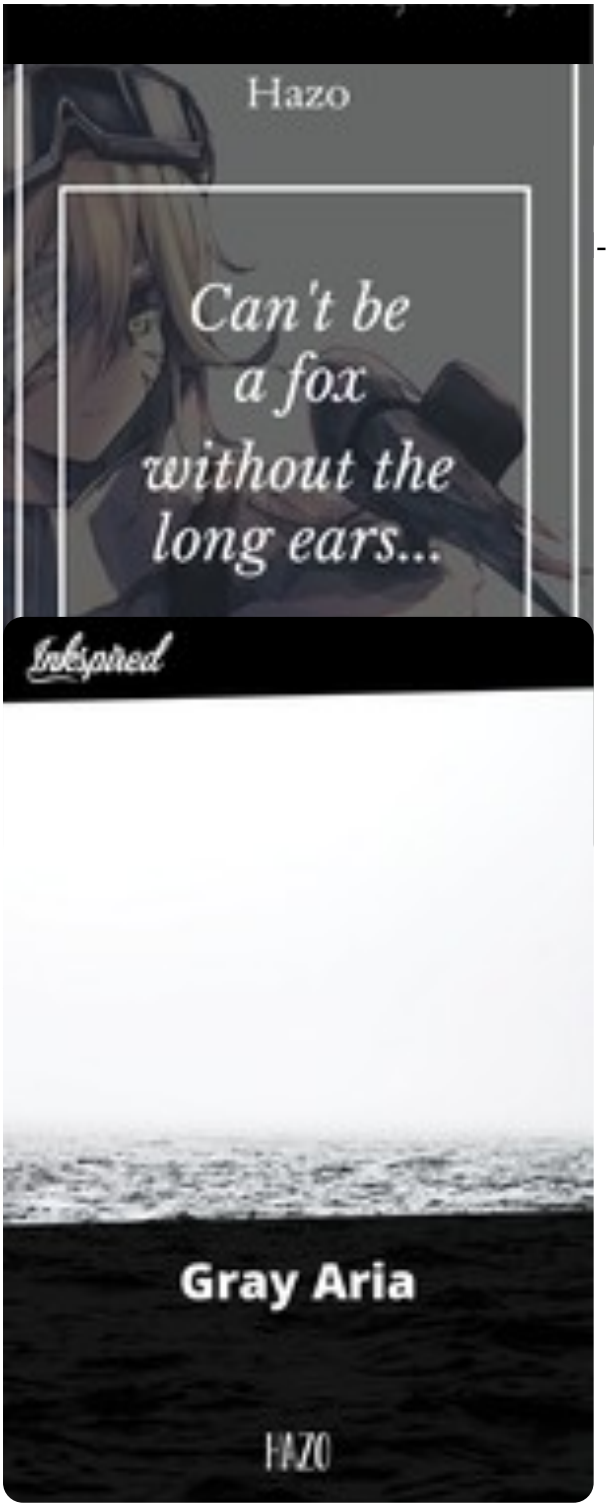

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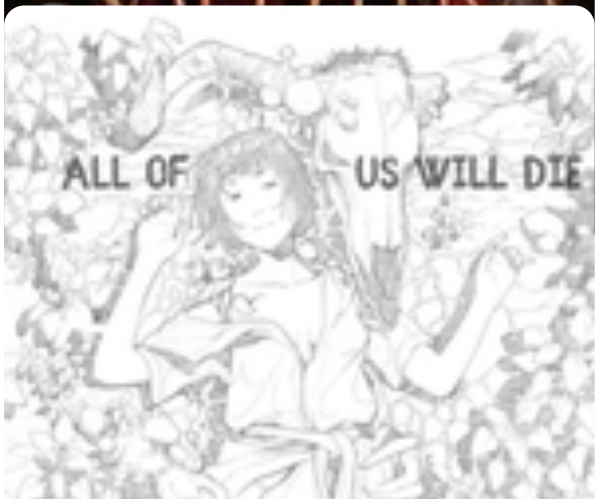

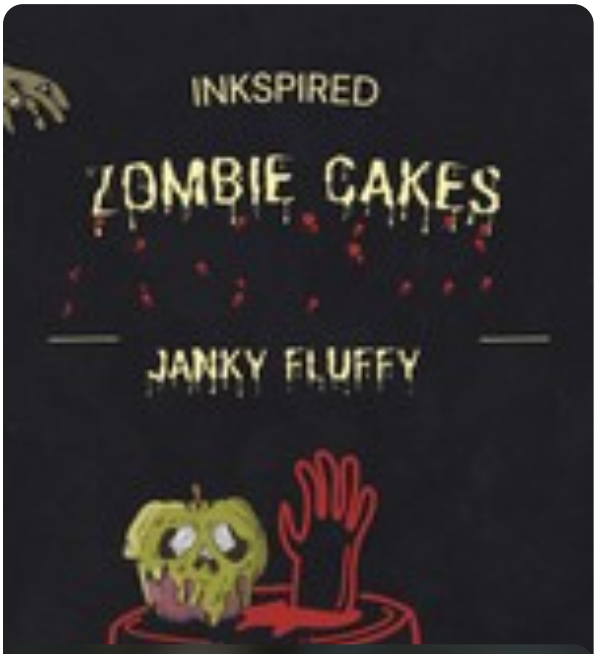

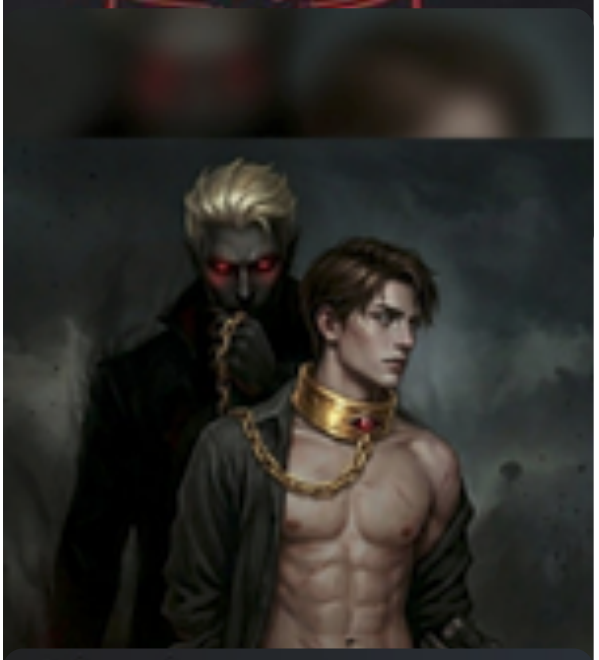

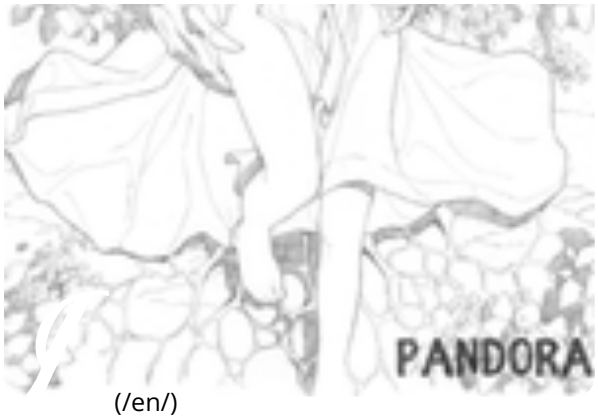

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